



United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism

As prepared for delivery by Jack Rosen,
Workshop on Anti-Semitism in the Media, i.a. Internet: Problems and Solutions
OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism
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Thank you.

As a child born to Holocaust survivors in a post war displaced persons camp, permit me to express some wonder not only that this conference is taking place, but also that we are holding this conference in the German Foreign Ministry.

If one looks at the glass as half full, then surely these opening observations serve as ample justification. We sit here, all the European and Eurasian states, America and Canada, in a unified and democratic Germany, almost sixty years after the end of the Holocaust. Germany invited us here at its own initiative and is quite prepared to discuss with us the most difficult chapter in its long history.

But the glass is also half empty. We are here to discuss the state of anti-Semitism, an angry and reactionary wave of hatred, bigotry and violence that has shaken Europe, and has shaken us in America as well.

The media are a key institution in modern society. They inform the public, and can reinforce or challenge conventional views. They deliver a message and invariably has a major impact. The problem is that too often the media in major parts of the OSCE region misquote or distort the facts of a story, and do not cover ongoing violence in a balanced fashion. The ripple effect that the media have on the public cannot be under-estimated.

Criticism of Israel is surely permissible. Moreover, legitimate criticism of a government's policy should not render one vulnerable to charges of hostility to the entire nation, its people and culture. In Israel itself all parts of society are engaged in an ongoing and vigorous public debate of the situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel's own media scrutinize thoroughly the country's internal political situation.

Unfortunately, reports we see from Israel and the Palestinian-populated areas often lack balance. Reporting on a complex situation requires rigor, discipline, and a special sensitivity to culture, restraint in language and a sense of historical responsibility. Inaccurate reporting can influence public opinion and produce a distorted picture of events and of the Jewish role in those events. This can trigger anti-Jewish hatred.

Distorted reportage blurs the distinction between being anti-Israel and being anti-Jewish. It is anti-Semitic to vilify the state of Israel, to invent malignant outrages, or to hold Israel to a standard to which other nations are not held.

There are those who say that some of the media's portrayal of the Arab-Israeli conflict is so biased as to cross the line separating legitimate criticism from rank anti-Semitism. Even Le Monde editorialized that "disapproval and condemnation of Israel's policy in the Palestinian territories have clearly lowered the barrier – already unclear to some – between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism." And just last week Stephen Byers told the House of Commons in London that "the line is now being crossed from legitimate criticism" of Israeli policy to the "demonization, dehumanization of Jews and the application of double standards."

But other press reports are less constructive and less observant. Some strongly criticize Israeli actions against known terrorists while Palestinian suicide bombings are portrayed sympathetically as "retaliation for Israeli aggression."

Another example concerns inflammatory reporting. The Guardian wrote that "Israel has no right to exist." The Observer described Israeli settlements on the West Bank as "an affront to civilization." L'Osservatore Romano spoke of Israel's aggression that's turning into extermination."

Media reports based on this kind of thinking and analysis stoke emotions and provide an excuse for anti-Jewish hatred.

Rigor, sensitivity and historical perspective are pre-requisite to the telling of a balanced story. The absence of these qualities leads to a distorted story. An example of the impact that such reporting can have is the recent poll indicating that a majority of Europeans see Israel as the greatest danger to world peace. This is a simplistic conclusion based on incomplete information about the complexities of the Middle East. More balanced news reporting would contribute to a better understanding of the situation on the ground and the realities with which the countries in that part of the world have to deal.

I urge the media to rethink their approach to the Middle East conflict, not because every Jewish action is legitimate and every Palestinian claim without merit, but because the situation is complex, and there are both Jewish rights and Palestinian rights to consider.

The media can help by paying attention to the root phenomenon of anti-Jewish outrages in the OSCE region. Does the current reporting make a difference? You bet. If the media explored anti-Jewish violence and attitudes more fully and actively, those who currently go with the flow of bigoted thinking could be exposed to a steady stream of information, analysis and reasoning to support an alternative case. There is no place in today's world for calumny based on ancient or modern racial and political hatreds. There is room, however, to air political differences in a context of objectivity and detachment.

Journalists and their editors have a special role in balancing their personal judgments and their reporting. Their work strongly influences what people think about a far away conflict that dramatically impacts inter-communal relations at home.

Some of the burdens of peace-making fall on the diplomats. Others, on the storytellers or the media. Journalists and editors have an important role to play and a responsibility to play it wisely. The media can help spread tolerance and understanding by condemning anti-Semitism outright and remaining on guard for its subtler manifestations.

The consequence of the media not taking steps to improve its product will be the growth of anti-Jewish hatred in the OSCE region.

Our challenge is to prevent this from ever happening again.